

had originally been set for May 1999.²⁸ Moreover, in a short visit to Hong Kong on May 17, he seized the opportunity to again criticize Chinese actions in the Kalayaan Islands during a speech before the Pacific Basin Economic Council.²⁹ The Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Zhu Bangzao, in a routine briefing, expressed Beijing's "deep regrets" about President Estrada's statement in Hong Kong.³⁰

On May 23, 1999, the Philippine Navy intercepted a group of Chinese fishing boats in the vicinity of Scarborough Shoal³¹ and as a consequence of its pursuit, sank one of the boats, claiming this was accidental.³² Chinese Ambassador Fu Ying contested this report and accused the Philippine Navy of deliberately sinking the vessel. She further demanded that the involved personnel from the Philippine Navy be punished, and that compensation be paid for the sinking of the vessel.³³ In a separate incident, another Chinese fishing boat sank on July 19 after an encounter with the Philippine Navy in the Spratlys which Philippine defence officials also insisted was accidental. Later, two old Philippine vessels reportedly ran aground on Scarborough Shoal and in the Spratlys, and could not be towed due to mechanical failure despite Chinese demands that they be removed.

Perceptions of a China threat soon paved the way for the Senate's ratification of a new "Visiting Forces Agreement" (VFA), that now allows American troops back into the Philippines for training and other activities in implementation of the 1951 Philippines-United States Mutual Defence Treaty. In his speech concurring with the VFA, Senate President Pro Tempore Blas Ople, chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee argued that

"...In our own part of the world, East Asia, the Chinese colossus has awakened... There is every indication ... that this giant has not only awakened but is belching forth a stream of fire - in the direction of the Philippines. One fine day in 1995, we woke up to discover that Chinese naval forces have occupied Mischief Reef....

...(T)oday it is Mischief Reef and the Scarborough Shoal off Zambales. Tomorrow there might be more tempting prizes, including Palawan and the Philippines itself.

²⁸ "Envoy to China stays but Estrada trip dims," *Today*, 31 March 1999, pp. 1, 8.

²⁹ "Erap talks on Spratlys anew," *Today*, 19 May 1999, p. 1.

³⁰ "China bewails Erap's comments on Spratlys," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 21 May 1999, p. 3.

³¹ Scarborough Shoal is another contested area between the Philippines and China northwest of the Spratlys. The dispute became active only after 1997. Prior to this, China had not contested Philippine use of the Shoal as a former lighthouse base nor as a target bombing range for practicing US Air Force personnel then based in the Philippines.

³² "RP Navy sinks Sino fishing boat," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 25 May 1999, pp. 1, 4.

³³ "China still wants to get paid for fishing boat that sank in the Spratlys." *Today*, 5 June 1999, p. 12.